

## Theologies of Atonement

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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### People of the Book: Theologies of Atonement

You may have heard about our new Worship Associates program where we invited folks to get more involved in worship in a variety of ways, including offering ideas for sermons. Today's sermon is the first fruits of that collaboration based on Bill Gnagey's idea of comparative theology. Being in the midst of the Jewish High Holy Days, atonement seemed a good topic to start with, but this will be a series of three sermons including theologies of leadership before Christmas and theologies of revelation for Epiphany.

First the disclaimers. One: I couldn't fit all world religions in 20 minutes so I stuck with Judaism, Christianity and Islam, known as the religions of the book and tied not only by the idea of written scriptures but by Middle Eastern tradition traced back to Abraham. Second disclaimer: not all people, sects or denominations within a single religion believe the same things. There's an 's' on the words theologies for a reason. I will offer something of an overview but I will be speaking particularly from the perspectives of Reformed Judaism, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) tradition of Christianity and Sunni Islam. Finally I want to thank Rabbi Lynn Goldstein of Moses Montefiore Temple, Rev. Cherée Johnson of Advocate BroMenn, May Jadallah and Hala Jadallah for so generously sharing their individual perspectives from within their own traditions. So, disclaimers firmly in place and understanding that I am not speaking for all people everywhere any more than I can codify the beliefs of all Unitarian Universalists, on to the content.

The theological concepts of sin and atonement are strong in all three traditions and have some similarities that you would expect given the common origins of the three religions, but there are also striking differences. One of the themes shared by all three religions is that wrongdoing, sin, going against the word of God as expressed in scripture, is unavoidable, so let me start with a story of consequences. It comes from Jewish midrash, commentary on the written scriptures.

A group was to take a journey by boat. As they climbed into the boat one man asked where he should sit and was shown to a seat.

"This is my seat?" he asked.

"Yes, this is your seat."

"Are you sure this is my seat and not someone else's?"

"No," he was reassured, "this is your seat"

"You're positive this is my seat?"

"Yes! It is certainly your seat and no one else's."

"OK"

As the boat reaches the center of the channel, the man takes out a drill and begins to drill a hole under his seat. Naturally, there is quite a reaction from the other passengers. "Stop doing that! You'll sink the boat!" They all start shouting at him to stop.

"I do not see why you are so excited." The man says. "I'm not doing anything to your seats. I am merely drilling under my own."

This story illustrates a concept that all three religions share – the idea that the wrongs people do have consequences for others. Atonement is the way we heal that which we injured, but what does it mean to have achieved atonement?

The commonly bandied etymology of the word atonement always struck me as too sophomoric to be true, but it actually is just like it's spelled: at-one-ment. Based on an older English word onement, to be joined together, it means to be “at one” or “at onement” with God.

The older Hebrew word for atonement is *teshuva*, based on the root *shuv*, which means “return.” So to atone is to return to a better way of behaving. You might consider the ultimate end of atonement in Judaism to be reunion with God, or in the more mystical streams healing the broken vessels of God's light to bring about *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world. But Judaism generally speaks little about the afterlife, focusing on the here and now. Atonement is about creating a better world more than any future reward or punishment.

Not so for Christianity where there is more focus on what lies beyond mortal existence. Certainly Christianity calls believers to make the world a just place, but this world, in the Black church tradition, is not our real home. *That* home, our true home, is with Jesus in the afterlife. Think of the words of spirituals and gospel songs – there's a better home awaiting in the sky, Lord, in the sky.

Islam shares Christianity's belief in an afterlife although it is achieved only after the Day of Judgment when all people will be resurrected. Only then will we live in either al-Jannah or al-Jahannam, roughly equivalent to the concepts of Christian heaven and hell. Islam, however, does not equate going to paradise with unification with God.

So, given those end goals, what is the method of atonement? How do we achieve the desired ends? Overly simplified answer: pray.

Judaism asks that one first acknowledge the nature of the wrong and ask forgiveness for it. The wronged party, the one from whom you seek forgiveness can be God, another person or oneself. Yes, you can sin against yourself. Having asked forgiveness, you then have to change your behavior. Being sorry you slapped someone does no good if you intend to slap them again as soon as the coast is clear. This is where prayer comes in because it's always easier to have a little help when you need to change your heart or your actions.

Having changed the behavior you then have to compensate the community for the wrong you did. Restitution to the wronged party may be part of that, but in Judaism's communal worldview, there are ways to compensate the whole community for your misdeeds.

I went pretty fast past the prayer part of that, but prayer is actually very important. During the Jewish month of Ayul, daily penitential prayers begin. During Tishrei, the prayers take on a more liturgical aspect, and the Ten Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a sort of last call for creating right relationship. Originally, this period of penitence was preparation for the agricultural festival of Sukkot, which comes at the end of the dry season. If you live in the desert and all the food is gone and you *really* need the rains to come, you had better make sure that you have purified yourself enough that you can stand before God and ask for help.

Although the form is quite different, the underlying Christian theology of prayer and atonement is based in a similar theology of purification. In Protestant churches the confession of sin and assurance of God's pardon comes before the sermon because it is in proclamation of the Word that worship takes place and one must be pure to preach and accept the Word. In Roman Catholic theology, worship happens through conferring the sacrament of communion so that purification through confession of sins and prayer must happen before communion can be taken.

This is based in the practices of the earliest Christian church communities that served an agape meal before the worship service, possibly growing out of the Jewish seder tradition though that claim is disputed. Either way, to sit down to the agape meal (to take communion) you had to be in right relationship with the community because you don't sit down at the table with folks you are feuding with. So the Jewish model of stating your wrongdoing, asking forgiveness and then seeking to change through prayer and worship continues into Christianity.

For Muslims prayer is equally important and also carries a sense of purification in that, done properly, prayer erases any sin committed since the last time the believer prayed. Weekly Friday prayers erase the small wrongs we do, the annual Ramadan observances erase the things we have done in the past year and the Hajj, the journey to Mecca, is a unique opportunity in one's lifetime to erase past transgressions. Let me just say erasing them doesn't just make them go away. Accountability on the Day of Judgment is still due, but for Muslims, as for Christians, atonement is a daily thing.

So prayer is a very important concept of atonement in all three religions, but there are other factors as well. The concept of sacrifice – whether in forgoing something you want or in acts of charity – can be important. In both ancient Judaism and modern Islam the sacrifice of animals as representing wealth and food are common practices. Of course, the ultimate act of sacrifice comes in Christianity, where the death of Jesus atoned for the sins of all humanity.

Unlike Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, most Protest denominations hold that it is through belief in Jesus alone that ultimate atonement and salvation are achieved. For the AME Church, relationship with Jesus is not only paramount but very personal and very intimate. It is a deep, unashamed love founded in the assurance of grace, a relationship in which no transgression is too big to be forgiven. It is that love that changes everything.

OK so that's enough theory and practice. Let's sing something and then we can talk about what it means to share the world with people of both convergent and differing beliefs.

### **Unitarian Universalism: Theologies of Atonement**

So how do we, as Unitarian Universalists living in this pluralistic society, interact with theologies of atonement? What theologies do we ourselves hold and what meaning do they give to our lives? The very idea of forgiveness for sins is carried right there in our very name: Unitarian *Universalist*. Universalism originally referred to the theology that all people were saved by a merciful and loving God. Universalists well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century considered themselves Christian so they did not see the theology of universal salvation as outside Christian understanding, although it set aside widespread belief that Jesus died to atone for the sins of all people.

Hosea Balou, often referred to as the Father of American Universalism, wrote one of his most famous works, *A Treatise on Atonement*, in 1805. In it he countered the prevailing theology of atonement, the view of salvation through the death of Jesus. He wrote this:

Atonement signifies reconciliation, or satisfaction, which is the same. It is a being unreconciled to truth and justice which needs reconciliation; and it is a dissatisfied being which needs satisfaction. Therefore I raise my inquiry on the question, Is God the unreconciled or dissatisfied party, or is man?...

If God were unreconciled to man, the atonement [of Christ's death] was necessary to renew his love to his creature; but if man were the unreconciled, the atonement was necessary to renew his love to his Creator. The matter is now so plainly stated that no person who can read can mistake.

Let's be clear, Balou is describing a very orthodox view of God as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Still he casts the argument for atonement into a very temporal, corporeal realm. It's about people he says, not about God. We're the ones who need to atone, to be at onement.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians, while not believers in universal salvation, also refuted atonement and ultimate salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus. William Ellery Channing, Unitarian contemporary to the Universalist Balou, expressed almost the same sentiment, though based it in the Unitarian emphasis on self culture rather than in universal salvation. He wrote:

It naturally leads men to think to think that Christ came to change God's mind rather than their own; that the highest object of his mission was to avert punishment rather than to communicate holiness; and that a large part of religion consists in disparaging good works and human virtue, for the purpose of magnifying the value of Christ's vicarious sufferings. In this way a sense of the infinite importance and indispensable necessity of personal improvement is weakened, and high-sounding praises of Christ's cross seem often to be substituted for obedience to his precepts.

A more contemporary view of the theology of atonement is presented by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock in their 2002 book, *Proverbs of Ashes*. In this powerful and personal narrative Brock and Parker take on the ways in which religion has justified violence trapping those without power into abusive situations of domestic violence and child abuse. They write: *When Jesus' crucifixion serves as a metaphor for spiritual processes of transformation, or a mystical illumination of God's abiding presence, violence is justified as sacred...*

Views like these, along with differing ideas about God and the divinity of Jesus have led Unitarian Universalists to largely set aside ideas of atonement inherited from our Christian ancestors. For the most part we have also set aside liturgical forms of repentance, particularly those that call us to acknowledge human sinfulness and seek divine forgiveness. The Calvinist views held by our Puritan forbearers of original sin and human fallenness do not, by and large, work for us today.

That we continue to carry on conversations about the nature of right relationship is a good thing, but I am saddened that we no longer incorporate liturgy that helps us face up to the wrongs we do and seek what peace we may achieve around them. It is uncomfortable to look at ways we

might have failed to bring our highest selves, but it is useful. I believe that most Unitarian Universalists are committed to the creation of just communities, which require of us forgiveness and reconciliation. I would posit that the majority of our members believe in free will and the human capacity to choose actions that are either life affirming or life denying. But how do we know which is which? Our history, like the history of all religious people, is marbled with choices that in hindsight seem poorly conceived at best and downright evil in some instances. Support for slavery, eugenics, and Nazism were all based in religious values by people who were not themselves thoroughly evil, but dreadfully misguided. How do we know, with any amount of surety, when we have done something that takes out of right relationship with what we consider to be most holy and of highest value? How do we know, in other words, whether our actions call for atonement? And when we are sure we have transgressed against the laws of the moral universe, individual or societal, how to get back to center?

Philosophers, ethicists and even biologists have given us hundreds of answers over the centuries. Evolutionary biologists suggest that it is instinctive, that humans possess an innate capacity for forgiveness that is the evolutionary result of social cooperation. Biologist Marc Hauser goes so far as to say that the moral capacity to distinguish right and wrong is hardwired into our brains. But taking into account all those other disciplines have to offer, we are still faced with making a religious response to good and evil, right and wrong, transgression and atonement.

My answer is many eyes, and many voices. Many eyes because we need each other's perspectives on questions of what defines "right." We each have information, worldviews and experience different from one another's. The richness that a multiplicity of perspectives brings helps widen our own view of what is life affirming for all. While Balou and Channing make points I ultimately support, there is no mistaking that they are writing from the elite viewpoint of highly privileged white males in America. Parker and Brock reach similar conclusions, but from the viewpoint of the marginalized and oppressed. So many eyes are needed.

And many voices because we have to be able to share those individual viewpoints in a way that is respectful yet courageous; a way that leaves no voice silenced as we seek together to define what is always in service of life and wholeness. What it means to be "at one" with each other, with ourselves, with the sacred.

It is quite simply about covenant. I worry little about whether human nature is innately depraved or forgiving, whether punishment or reward await me after death. I worry a great deal about covenant – about recognizing and remaining true to that which is in service of life. To consider one's actions and words, to ask for forgiveness when you live short of your ideals, to make good on the injuries you cause, to make missteps and call each other lovingly back into right relationship – this is to be in covenant. This is to be at onement.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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